



Spotlight on Rutland County: How Local Ties Lead to Local Wins

Key Takeaways

- Understand who is trusted most in your community before determining the best voice for your program
- Leverage relationships within your community and across the state to identify resources and spread the word widely
- Adjust tactics quickly in response to stakeholder feedback



BetterBuildings is a pioneering program from the U.S. Department of Energy that is improving lives and communities across the country.

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Neighbors Excel in Spreading the Value of Energy Efficiency in Rutland, Vermont

Building on their understanding of homeowners in Rutland County, Vermont, NeighborWorks of Western Vermont (NWWVT) has enlisted well-respected local citizens and organizations to spread the word about home energy efficiency upgrade opportunities, an effort that has driven demand for nearly 200 home upgrades in just six months. With its DOE BetterBuildings funding, NWWVT created the "Home Efficiency Assistance Team," or the H.E.A.T. Squad, which works with local organizations across the 26 towns in the county to conduct phone-a-thons, direct outreach, and personalized home visits to develop public interest in energy efficiency. Team members are available through a local hotline to educate homeowners about energy efficiency and to sign them up for an evaluation. After completing the evaluation, staff members offer to meet in person for a "kitchen table" discussion to review the evaluation results, contractor recommendations, and financing options. It's a neighbor to neighbor approach that taps into the strengths of both the organization and the communities where they are working.

Leverage Existing Relationships and Strong Community Ties to Deliver Real Benefits

Capitalizing on its experience operating affordable housing programs in Rutland County for many years, NWWVT is bringing existing offers from Vermont's third-party energy efficiency utility, Efficiency Vermont, to its communities. NWWVT program leaders recognized that citizens of Rutland County were not taking advantage of Efficiency Vermont's valuable programs and that the organization's own experience finding trusted messengers in the community could be a significant asset for increasing participation. NWWVT decided to use its existing strong community relationships to bring energy efficiency to hundreds of low to middle income homeowners in the county. As a result, in only six months, NWWVT facilitated 196 energy efficiency upgrades and interest continues to grow.¹

Finding the Right Messenger Builds Trust and Buy-In

NWWVT knows that Rutland County residents have strong relationships in their communities and that the most trusted messengers are neighbors, rather than the government or utilities. To put these insights into action, Executive Director Ludy Biddle tapped into her own hometown of Shrewsbury to launch the first phase of the program.

¹ NWWVT results as of March 15, 2011.

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Make the Phones Ring off the Hook by Personally Reaching Out

Within two months of receiving its Department of Energy (DOE) seed funding, the NeighborWorks H.E.A.T. Squad used low-cost, community-based methods to launch its initial outreach initiative—sending out postcards and hosting a phone-a-thon. Soon after the postcards were sent, the Shrewsbury Conservation Commission—a five-member volunteer group that takes on various environmental projects around town—staffed a one-night phone-a-thon for Shrewsbury residents. The phone-a-thon offered citizens a \$50 home energy check-up and an opportunity to learn more about their homes' energy use. The program was swamped with requests for home visits and more information, and soon residents who weren't reached during the calls were wondering why “no one called me.”



Significant progress was made as a result of the phone-a-thon. Of the 192 households contacted during that single evening, 69 evaluations were conducted and 35 upgrades were completed—an impressive 51% conversation rate. Since the initial phone-a-thon, word has continued to spread, and residents from across the county are clamoring for the H.E.A.T. Squad to launch in their towns.

Homeowner testimonials were overwhelmingly positive. Comments on the benefits of the evaluations and upgrades ranged from “the money I saved” to “how much more comfortable my house is.” Lucy Biddle, Executive Director of NWWVT, was thrilled with the response. “We knew the program was really helping residents when the most frequent comment was ‘you’ve made it so easy!’” she remarked.

NWWVT learned through previous experiences that the most trusted messengers to residents are neighbors, not the government or utilities.

Keep Up Promotional Momentum by Tapping Community Channels

To continue the successful outreach from Shrewsbury, the program is also utilizing other neighborhood-based marketing to generate interest. Two specific approaches include utilizing town email systems, typically used for town updates or to find a lost pet, and employing influential community members and groups to engage residents and act as program spokespeople. Further, a user-friendly website provides information about energy evaluations and upgrades, options for financing, and a summary of program services provided. By using communication channels and messengers already trusted and tapped by residents, the program has been able to launch quickly, saving time and money without planning an uncertain and expensive advertising campaign.

NWWVT has also developed a local phone hotline for residents to ask questions and receive answers from the H.E.A.T. Squad. NWWVT staff will assist homeowners with scheduling upgrades and, in some cases, even make sure that someone is at home if the owner is unavailable when a contractor is completing an evaluation. Every element of the program's marketing efforts tie back to providing true neighbor-to-neighbor value.



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—Ludy Biddle
Executive Director, NWWVT

Getting the Tactics and the Offer Right May Require Trial and Error

In addition to examining the results of reaching out through community channels, NWWVT used its initial Shrewsbury promotion to test the hypothesis that the high cost of an energy evaluation is a major barrier to getting homeowners to invest in energy efficiency upgrades. Efficiency Vermont offers a \$250 rebate for an evaluation, which requires the homeowner to pay the initial cost and then apply for the rebate after the evaluation and installation of any necessary health and safety improvements.² NWWVT took a new approach by offering Shrewsbury residents an evaluation for only \$50 upfront. NWWVT used BetterBuildings seed funding to cover the remainder of the evaluation cost to test whether decreasing the initial cost would increase participation in home energy evaluations.

Program managers were overwhelmed with the deluge of requests as a result of the offer, completing nearly 400 evaluations in six months. NWWVT quickly hired additional staff to support the Shrewsbury pilot and future efforts. They also discovered that homeowners were eligible to claim the full \$250 Efficiency Vermont rebate on energy evaluations that cost them only \$50. To close that loophole, Efficiency Vermont rebates are now being assigned directly to NWWVT to avoid over-compensating and to help defray the program cost of the evaluations. The incentive did spark initial interest in the program, but program staff members are now looking for creative ways to reduce the barrier to having an evaluation completed without additional subsidies. NWWVT’s ultimate goal is to find ways to reduce, not increase, dependence on cash outlays in order to model an affordable, sustainable program.

² Health and safety improvements include mechanical ventilation, carbon monoxide detectors, or other essential health and safety improvements identified during the evaluation.



Rutland County, Vermont

Accomplishments

Within Six Months of Program Launch

- 386 evaluations conducted
- 196 residential energy upgrades completed
- 51% conversion rate from evaluation to upgrade

Program Elements

Driving Demand

- Neighbor-to-neighbor
- Low-cost evaluations

Workforce

- Expanding local contractor base

Financing

- Low-interest, unsecured loans for up to 10 years

Program Facts

- DOE Seed Funding: \$4.5 million
- Building Types: Residential
- Building Upgrade Goal: 2,000 home evaluations; 1,000 energy efficiency upgrades
- Workforce Goal: Create more than 350 jobs in Rutland County

BetterBuildings: NeighborWorks of Western Vermont H.E.A.T. Squad

NeighborWorks of Western Vermont (NWWVT) is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting safe and affordable housing, focusing on sustainable home ownership. After receiving BetterBuildings seed funding, NWWVT was able to add a new goal to its existing program: convincing Vermonters to complete home energy efficiency upgrades. With that in mind, NWWVT created the NeighborWorks Home Efficiency Assistance Team (H.E.A.T.) Squad Program which employs a neighbor-to-neighbor approach to deliver energy efficiency across the county.

Learn More

www.heatsquad.org

www.nwwvt.org

BetterBuildings: Rutland, Vermont NeighborWorks H.E.A.T. Squad Contact

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